

English Camp: A Language Immersion Program in Thailand

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Abstract

A summer English camp language immersion program, which began in 2003, provided instruction by native English speakers to Thai college students via collaboration between Prince of Songkla University in Thailand and Ball State University in Indiana, USA. During this program, Thai students were exposed to English formally through classroom instruction and through informal field experiences. During the 2005 program, one English camp leader conducted a study for her three-student group to assess how well the program assisted in language acquisition through writing. The results indicated the immersion program was successful not only in language acquisition but also in cultural understanding for all the program participants.

Due to the economic crises and political challenges in the late 1990s, Thailand was forced to increase its global competition. Among many means for achieving this goal is the enhancement and improvement of English language skills for the Thai students. A grant was offered to Thai universities to promote English to the college students. Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai, Thailand, under President Prasert Chitapong, received grant monies to set up the English Camp Language Immersion Program in 2003 with Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, USA.

To offset the concerns of a typical second language experience, an English Camp Language Immersion Program was established in 2003. This program supplied English-speaking teachers traveling to Thailand for an intense 15-day camp that included both classroom and field study situations. The goal was for students to gain knowledge of the English language and acquire confidence in their speaking skills. An additional benefit was that all the participants (students and instructors) developed a deeper appreciation of the people and the new culture to which they were exposed.

The program was coordinated by Kris Rugasken, Ph.D., a linguistically-trained Thai-born educator. Taking the language to the students in their own environment broke the resistance students frequently experience

when learning a new language, as described in Wilkinson (1995). Since the program's inception, seven English camp language immersion programs have taken place in Thailand. This study, however, focuses on just one group of students who participated as one learning group in 2005.

The premise for the study was that the immersion program would enhance the students' writing. As a result, the target students were given a 20 minute writing assignment at the beginning of the camp and another 20 minute writing assignment at its completion.

Background

A simple "purpose of immersion programs is to provide input from native language models in naturalistic non-monitored situations" (Garcia & Torres-Ayala, 1991, p. 439). Immersion programs can be found in a variety of formats; the most common situation is for students to be taught a second language within a classroom setting. However, that format has inherent restrictions such as reliance on the teacher's knowledge and pronunciation ability, limitations of materials and environmental contexts, and conflicts between dividing time over grammar lessons and real-life conversational skills. Providing an "integration of content teaching and language teaching is paramount" for students to internalize another language (Swain & Lapkin, 1989, p. 150). Such integration allows them to immediately put the new knowledge that they have just acquired in class to use in their real life.

When discussing language immersion programs, the general reference is to teach students a new "foreign" language by immersing them in the new language (L2), as if they were born into it, so they learn through context as they did their first language (L1). Typically, the second language acquisition class has a blend of grammar instructions and contextual conversations, the balance of which is determined by the mission, goals and objectives that the program administrators establish.

Dartmouth College and Manchester Community College in Connecticut established intensive English immersion programs within their institutions. Both institutions reported positive results; specifically, Manchester students learned one-third more material in the intensive program than students in the traditional classes (Liskin-Gasparro, 1998). Immersion programs generally refer to teaching students a new language, but programs have also been designed for other purposes such as teaching students living in a major culture the language of a subculture or minority. Two examples are children learning French in Canada and introducing the "heritage language" of Basque to students in the Basque region of Spain (Walker & Tedick, 2000).

In an effort to find successful components within an immersion program, Swain and Lapkin (1989) found that good listening and reading comprehension were developed further in immersion programs than in regular classrooms. They also reported that students can learn other subjects well through a second language and learning can occur without being detrimental to their native language. However, immersion students were not as competent in the areas of spelling and writing as their peers in the traditionally taught language classrooms.

Hammerly (1987) reviewed six studies of immersion programs which

extended instruction for more than one year. All programs reported results less satisfactory than had been expected. He concluded that the weaknesses of extended immersion programs derive from the following example of an unsupported assumption:

The younger the better . . . If a careful record of the time devoted to second language interaction were kept in such natural language acquisition settings, adults would likely be found to be more efficient learners. It seems the untutored acquisition of native-like second language pronunciation is the only area in which young children do better than adults probably because of the children's superior motor memory" (p. 398).

The structure of many immersion programs has come under severe criticism. The L2 classroom is not a natural second language acquisition environment; thus, a natural sociolinguistic language acquisition cannot be reproduced in the classroom. "There is nothing natural about learning language within four classroom walls" (Hammerly, 1987, p. 398). A related problem that frequently occurs with classroom management, according to Hammerly, is when students convey their ideas accurately, but do so with faulty language, the answer is frequently accepted by the teacher so the student loses motivation to become an accurate speaker. The role of the teacher in the learning process is once again validated as extremely important.

Similarly, Holoc's (1987) longitudinal study found that students changed their ideas about language learning after face-to-face meetings with instructors. This "implies that second language acquisition is socially constructed from interactions with others" (Kalaja, 1995, p. 196). Tarone and Swain (1995) also found through observations and interviews that students used their second language skills less in informal peer to peer interactions. The students also tended to be more reluctant to use the L2 in informal settings as they got older. However, there was a desire to be taught more informal registers of the target language. It was found that contact increases usage of informal registers (Mougeon & Rehner, 2001). A constructive guideline for building an immersion program is to "involve children in immersive activities outside the classroom with peers who are native speakers of the L2" (Tarone & Swain, 1995, p. 174).

The actual pedagogy of when to teach what to L2 students is also under debate. Cummins (1977) suggests there may be a threshold level of bilingual competence which an individual must attain before his or her access to a second language can begin to have a positive influence on his cognitive functioning. The first stages should include an introduction of the people and culture, using systematic teaching/learning of sequenced instruction, and vocabulary/idiom instruction rather than immersion. The contention is that students need fluency and accuracy.

Rifkin (2005) studied the acquisition of the language arts skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. He found a significant correlation between the hours of classroom instruction in immersion and non-immersion settings with grammatical accuracy. The data showed that the immersion-based instruction was more efficient with students developing the four skills,

as well as grammar/syntax acquisition, than the traditional classroom. There seemed to be a ceiling effect in the traditional classroom for foreign language instruction. Rifkin suggested the best way to break through this ceiling was for students to begin their L2 study in a traditional classroom, learn key grammatical and syntactical constructs, and then participate in immersive learning experiences. This supports earlier research that classes need to emphasize structure and grammar initially so students can acquire cognitively-based error correction (Hammerly, 1987). Students undervalue the linguistic metacognitive skills they developed in learning L1 and are unaware of how to apply them to L2. Additionally, students are surprised that linguistic development is neither steady nor uniform (Liskin-Gasparro, 1998).

Research on student opinions of immersion programs varies. Swain and Lapkin (1989) found that where language practice is isolated from the substance of content lessons, linguistic competence does not appear to improve. Additionally, it was found that students expected language interactions in the real world to be like the classroom exercises (Wilkinson, 1995). However, a study of short-term travel abroad programs found that students can benefit in many ways. Participants in the short-term programs learned that fluency was not necessary for communication, their future fields of study were broadened by the program, and most importantly, their interest was sparked to continue a course of study about the new language and culture (Gorka & Niesenbaum, 2001).

Liskin-Gasparro (1998) reported that students expressed three themes of concern with regard to learning a language through an immersion context: 1. A high degree of language usage sparked crises in their self-confidence. 2. A love-hate relationship with formal instruction developed. 3. A notion that fluency should be automatic existed for many students. A striking finding in her research was the individuals' insecurity with performance. They reported frustration with "being themselves" in another language (Liskin-Gasparro 1998, p. 171). The students reported the mixed beliefs that language learning is something that happens exclusively in schools and also the conflicting belief that an immersion experience is the only way to learn really well (Liskin-Gasparro, 1998).

Levin (2003) studied student anxiety while learning L2 skills. He found that students who reported higher L2 usage in their foreign language classes felt lower levels of anxiety about using the L2. The implication is that many students felt more comfortable with L2 when they were placed in situations with a high inundation of L2.

Liskin-Gasparro substantiates this concern by quoting from a student's e-mail message written while she was in a Spanish immersion program within Middlebury College in Vermont. She told her friend that her Spanish was getting worse because she spent all her time talking Spanish with her friends who are not native Spanish speakers. She reported that her Spanish appeared to be worse, instead of better (Liskin-Gasparro 1998). This concern illuminates the problem of not having enough models speaking the language appropriately for students to emulate correct pronunciation. This problem was reported by Hammerly in 1987; he stated that many immersion programs involve students in a classroom with only one native speaker.

An additional compounding feature is that frequently, when students are taught English in another country, the teachers have been taught by teachers who were not native English speakers, so their pronunciation and intonation may not reflect the standard language usage.

Method

The Thai student participants had all studied English previously, but the degree of accomplishment varied greatly from student to student. Even students who had studied English for many years were rarely taught by a native English-speaking teacher.

English Camp Program Details

Given all the various forms that immersion programs can take, along with all the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the programs, it seems prudent to continue to explore new and creative delivery systems for language learning. The English Camp program incorporated the following goals of a language immersion program as presented by Walker and Tedick (2000). Their recent examination of numerous immersion programs has prompted the listing of eight core features that can help program directors distinguish one program from another. The core features are always considered on a continuum and include the following:

- ◆ the L2 is the medium of instruction,
- ◆ the immersion curriculum parallels the local L1 curriculum,
- ◆ overt support exists for the L1,
- ◆ the program aims for additive bilingualism,
- ◆ exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom,
- ◆ students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency,
- ◆ the teachers are bilingual; and,
- ◆ the classroom culture is that of the local L1 community. (Walker and Tedick, 2000).

As such, the daily camp schedule entailed three hours of classroom instruction, lunch, and an afternoon field trip with the students. Frequently, evening activities were planned. The camp met for 15 consecutive days. The term "camp leader" will be used for the title of each teacher who was in charge of a group of students in the classroom, on the field trips and during recreational evening activities. The number of camp leaders per year ranges from the lowest of 17 in 2003 to the highest of 31 in 2007. In 2009, 20 camp leaders participated in this program. Each camp leader's class included 3-9 Thai college students. The class size fluctuated from year to year. This study focused on one camp leader and her 3 student participants in 2005.

Rugsaken recruited English camp leaders and conducted three training sessions, which included background information on Thai culture, "Dos and Taboos," and the differences between Thai and English. He also supplied each camp leader with lesson plans, resources, and ideas for classroom activities. Although all the camp leaders had the same lesson plans, they were permitted some latitude on the content of their lessons; therefore,

there were variations between the classrooms and the content.

Once in Thailand, the days were very full. There was a suggested topic for each of the days the students met with their camp leaders in the classroom settings. However, each camp leader could develop the content as s/he chose. In general, most days had the following schedule: The morning classroom sessions consisted of grammar lessons, clarification of idioms, oral practice, TESOL exercises, and reading and writing activities. The camp leaders stayed with their students most days during all the subsequent daily activities. Sightseeing was done by the students and camp leaders for the rest of the day. Informal conversations in English occurred throughout the field trip between the students and camp leaders. Because all students were new to the sights, they were as excited and motivated by the new experience as were their camp leaders.

This study focuses on what one camp leader developed with her program. After three days with her class (consisting of three students), the camp leader decided as part of her lesson plan, she would conduct a simple literacy lesson with her class. She wanted to compare authentic writing from the beginning to the ending of the English camp experience to note changes in the students' written production. The impetus for the writing experiences was the various field trip activities. For the first lesson, the students had a field trip to Rajjaprabha Dam after which conversation ensued regarding sights, smells, impressions, etc. of the trip. The class drew a semantic map, or web, of the experience. After making the semantic map, the camp leader asked the students to write an essay for 20 minutes about the experience. At the end of the time, the papers were collected. Twelve days later, at the conclusion of the camping experience, the camp leader again led a discussion which summarized another field trip experience and on a different topic, and a semantic map was drawn based upon what the students said. The camp leader asked the same three students to write another 20 minutes essay on the current discussion.

Results

Comparisons were made between the three students' pre and post writing assignments and are presented for review:

In examining the total words used in the pre- and the post-writings, there was a 116% increase. In counting the total number of sentences produced in the pre and the post writings, there was a 78% increase. All three students increased in their use of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, articles, prepositions, and pronouns with an exception of one student who used one fewer article in the post writing.

Discussion

In examining these three writing samples, great gains can be seen in word usage from the first to the second writing samples. The students were more confident in putting words on papers, creating new sentences, and using all forms of words. The amount of contact with native English speakers gave the Thai students many opportunities, in and out of the classroom, to develop their English language competency.

Table 1

Results of pre and post writing assignments for three students.

	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Word totals	56	147	57	166	83	114
Sentences	7	15	4	10	7	7
Nouns	13	43	11	32	17	30
Verbs	8	19	9	24	16	16
Adjectives	3	10	6	15	7	12
Adverbs	1	7	4	8	4	10
Conjunctions	4	6	4	13	4	7
Articles	5	6	4	8	4	3
Prepositions	7	19	3	18	6	8
Pronouns	8	20	5	27	16	14

In a comparison of the students' first and second writings, it was obvious that their second writing 12 days later made more sense than the first ones. They appeared to have expressed their ideas more freely and had a better control of syntax than in their first writing. The students were able to be themselves in English as the days passed.

Implications

This unique program and limited language acquisition study presents an exciting possibility of addressing how an immersion program best evolves. The implications are important because students will prosper the quicker they acquire the second language.

Further Studies

Certainly, many other areas related to the English Camp program could be investigated. Additional comparisons could be made of reading and writing skills as well as cross-cultural studies of Thai and English college students. Researchers should take into account ethnographic variables within the social and cultural environment (Liskin-Gasparro, 1998). Future questions could include how do learners construct social networks and how do these networks interact with language use? How do various learning styles react to the English camp experience? How do students from different disciplines fare in the same program?

Conclusion

This study is uniquely different from other research on immersion programs, but it clearly demonstrates a significant improvement in students' learning. The camp leaders are immersed within a foreign culture. At the same time, the Thai college students are immersed within an English-speaking environment while still in their indigenous culture. It is an immersion program within an immersion program. The English Camp Language Immersion Program needs to be replicated and investigated more fully so that students in various countries can reap the important benefits inherent in its structure. It is a concept that warrants further implementation and investigation.

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